



We are famous here in Portland for some of our infrastructure – light rail, streetcars, bicycles – and also what we’ve done with energy, environmental protection, and forethought about how we design and locate buildings. This physical infrastructure makes a huge difference in the livability of our community, but it wouldn’t be possible without the civic infrastructure making the right long-term decisions and answering the tough questions about planning, implementation, and finance.

These decisions affect people’s pocketbooks, their business, their front yard – things that they have grown used to, care about, and invested in. This type of change is not easy. So how has Portland been able to negotiate this tricky path and undertake such amazing signature projects that have attracted people literally from around the world to watch, to look, and to learn?

Solution

The successful development of our physical infrastructure is in no small measure due to our civic infrastructure. We have successfully engaged citizens as a part of the decision-making process, not just to listen to reports and show up at meetings, but to be involved in and help shape outcomes. For example, the introduction of the modern streetcar in Portland is largely the result of a dedicated core of citizens who volunteered to plan, to promote, and to operate first our vintage trolley, then our street car, now its expansion.

When Portland opened its first light rail line, pioneering the national effort for light rail, it was controversial even after the successful opening. A regional rail program was developed to

empower citizens to plan the future, where the lines would go, what was outside the window, and how to pay for it. Now these regional rail summits have evolved into the celebrated national Rail~Volution Conference, which is helping citizens around America develop their own transit infrastructure.

Among a number of land use achievements, nothing surpasses the Albina Community Plan, a project of the Portland Planning Bureau and hundreds of citizens working together to plan an area that included some of Portland's most troubled neighborhoods. The nine volunteer Portlanders who were members of the Planning Commission at the time spent countless hours, serving as a critical sounding board between the people in the neighborhood, vital business interests and the City itself. Today, as a result of the success of that collaborative and visionary effort of involving the community in neighborhood planning, we often proudly walk with visitors down exciting vibrant streets that we would not have driven people down two decades earlier.

Soon after Congressman Blumenauer was elected to the city council and designated to the public works commissioner leading the charge on, among other things, transportation, he was inundated with advice from seemingly everyone with a driver's license on how to time streetlights and when and how to pave our streets. However, strong opinions and emotions didn't always correlate to the reality on the ground or generate constructive solutions.

In response, Blumenauer started the Portland Traffic and Transportation Class where the tuition was paid for dozens of activists every year to earn college credit. Their assignment was to solve transportation problems in their neighborhoods, but first they had to listen to the traffic engineers, the planners, the people who operated and built the systems to learn the science of the transportation movement and land use. Arming advocates with this information allowed them to figure out cost-effective ways to solve problems, and lead to the funding of dozens of transportation projects.

There are over 1,300 members of alumni of the class and it continues to this day. It's been another vital addition to our civic infrastructure. It's part of the reason why Robert Putnam, the Harvard sociologist who wrote *Bowling Alone*, in a later book, *Better Together*, had a separate chapter about Portland because of its unique civic culture and ability make things happen.

Of all the ideas that we are advancing this year, there is none that is more central to our success, whether it's on the local, regional, national, or global scale, than how we develop that citizen infrastructure – how we plan, how we empower, how we work together to implement it.

Without it, we're rolling the dice in an expensive and dangerous way because ultimately no matter how good the idea, no matter how grand the plan, unless we harness the support and engagement of our citizens even the most lofty and well-intentioned of ideas will fall flat.

[<Previous Idea](#)

[Next Idea>](#)

40
WEEKS

[Visit the Ideas Index](#)

40
IDEAS